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The Evolution Within Human

A review of: Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism. Theory in the New Humanities* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

Abstract: *Philosophical Posthumanism* is a unique intellectual proposition – one in which Francesca Ferrando not only presents and expands but also celebrates posthumanist thought. The monograph is an open invitation to explore new horizons by de-familiarizing classical humanist thought embedded within the Western civilization. Explicitly deconstructing classical humanism, Ferrando offers her readership a versatile insight into the complexity of the polyphony of new voices including, but not limited to, Posthumanism, Transhumanism, and Antihumanism – contributing to the discourse, which, as the author affirms, is tantamount to the “philosophy of our time.”¹

Keywords: posthumanism, philosophy, power, Francesca Ferrando

In the process of the ongoing radicalization of the premises of feminist theory and queer studies, confronted with the ever-growing intensity of the endeavors of human rights activists, incapable of “catching up” with the rapid development of critical race studies and steadily rising social consciousness of the legacy of colonialism and its consequences, traditional Western humanism appears to quickly lose its former explanatory power. The thus-far prevalent anthropocentric approaches more and more evidently fail to exhaustively cover the wide scope of human experience. Yet, built on the fundament of philosophical anthropocentrism, the Western civilization gave rise to a persistent conceptual system supporting the idea of a “model Man” – a system which effectively guards the social status quo, fostering a sense of superiority in some humans, who feel legitimate in dominating “Others,” that is those who do not meet the criteria of the “model Man.” Despite unprecedented social and historical transformations of the 20th and 21st centuries, the persevering conviction that there are “us” and “others” and that “otherness” should legitimately be viewed as inferior, continues to affect lives – especially the lives of those who fail to qualify as representatives of the dominant

1. Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism (Theory in the New Humanities)* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 1.

category. Beyond question, today more obviously than ever, there is an urgency for a philosophical and social shift concerning the notion and the perception of who/what a human is.

Responding to this urgency, Francesca Ferrando posits a post-humanist, post-anthropocentric, post-dualist, inclusive approach, aiming to redefine the understanding of the human by rejecting the ideas central to classical humanism with the view to embracing the complexity of the vast spectrum of human experience. Philosophical posthumanism distances itself from the universalist rhetoric of Western humanism; within its vision, there is no longer one type of a human designed to embody the norm. Instead, posthumanism embraces existing differences by addressing them in a non-relativistic, non-hierarchical way.

Ferrando argues that in the 21st century the sense of the term “human” has been challenged owing to the marked increase in social awareness, impacted, among others, by revolutionary developments in such areas of science as cybernetics or biotechnology. In this context, the scholar notes that the physicality of the human no longer constitutes a decisive factor in social interactions, since communications, as the experience of the recent pandemic clearly emphasized, shifted largely to the virtual space. Her reflections concerning the depreciation of the importance of the physical location in human interactions, however, only pave the path for a much less obvious insight concerning ethical issues that have become burning when the advancement of science made such developments as surrogate motherhood or human cloning, “deconstructing natural conception,” technologically viable.² These and other phenomena brought the concepts of the posthuman and the transhuman to the forefront of the attention of the practitioners of both philosophical and scientific enquiry. Acknowledging this fact, Ferrando emphasizes that while the posthumanist movement embraces technological development, philosophical posthumanism cannot be reduced solely to the technological aspect human existence: any such attempt would misrepresent posthumanism as classist as techno-centric, from which the movement clearly departs. In its fundamental assumptions, a posthuman approach cannot be limited to any monocentric association: it is neither (only) about the human nor (only) about technology. Rather, it is “an onto-epistemological approach, as well as an ethical one, manifesting as a philosophy of mediation, which discharges any confrontational dualism and hierarchical legacies; this is why it can be approached as a post-humanism, a post-anthropocentrism, and a post-dualism.”³ As such, posthumanism emphasizes the deconstruction of traditional, hierarchical Western models and systems and a radical deconstruction of the binary conception of the human. It decen-

2. Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism...*, 22.

3. Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism...*, 22.

ters the human, thereby disarming anthropocentrism; it embraces differences, focusing on the human impact on ecosystem; it acknowledges the self as plural and relational. Posthumanism, as Ferrando observes, is not only the speculation of how human species may develop, but also a reflection on what has been absent in the concept of the human. As such, posthumanism requires – and in itself is a function of – a critical revision of the notion of the human.⁴

The “posthuman,” however, serves as an umbrella term. It designates a variety of philosophical approaches (some of which, as the author demonstrates, may be antithetical) aiming to challenge the “archetypal” boundaries of the “human.” Among these, the most distinctive are antihumanism, transhumanism, and poshumanism. Of the three, as Ferrando points out, transhumanism and posthumanism are most often confused. Although sharing some postulates with the latter, the former stems from different philosophical roots: while posthumanism evolved out of postmodernism, transhumanism is grounded in the philosophical tradition of the Enlightenment. Consequently, posthumanism rejects “rational humanism”⁵ while transhumanism embraces it.

Although transhumanism is not a homogenous movement, what the different “schools” of thought falling within its scope have in common is the emphasis on human enhancement. Significantly, as the author of the monograph observes, the most influential transhumanist online platform is titled “H+,” where the letter “H” stands for “human,” and the plus sign – for enhancement.⁶ Transhumanists view enhancement in terms of scientific and technological processes, in which context a further discrepancy between posthumanism and transhumanism becomes manifest. According to the proponents of posthumanism, we can be – or even are – posthuman already; according to transhumanists, we will only become posthuman in the future. In transhumanist view, we are, at present, in the process of transition from human to posthuman. Ferrando stresses that bearing the difference in the philosophical provenance of each of these movements in mind, it is possible to approach posthumanism from the perspectives of (hyphenated) post-humanism, post-anthropocentrism, and post-dualism. Contrary-wise, transhumanist thought does not deconstruct the traditional notion of the human. Under transhumanism, the concept of the human is “augmented” rather than deconstructed, and therefore, according to Ferrando, the movement could legitimately be referred to as “ultra-humanism.”⁷ As opposed to posthumanism, the author explains, transhumanism is technocentric, but, more importantly, it puts

4. Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism...*, 23.

5. Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism...*, 32.

6. Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism...*, 31.

7. Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism...*, 33.

emphasis on “reason” – an idea seriously challenged by theoreticians representing such areas of research as feminism, critical race studies, queer theory, animal studies, and many others. Ferrando argues that it is with the assertion of the human rationality as the defining trait of the species that hierarchical systems of power are called into existence. Historically, such systems fostered discrimination, mistreatment, legal violence, or even murder – not only of non-human animals, but also of the discriminated “others”: women, non-white people, queer people, or people with disabilities. If unchallenged, the emphasis on human rationality (as opposed to non-human non-rationality) energizes dualist approaches, that is, it reinforces positions contrary to what posthumanism aspires to represent. Therefore, Ferrando argues, transhumanism might benefit from revisiting its approach towards the humanist paradigm, but also from rethinking the original premises of its technocentric orientation.⁸

Nonetheless, transhumanism, like all other posthuman movements, is, first and foremost, a praxis. Within its fold, the anarchist-transhumanist movement (which Ferrando’s large-scale inquiry leaves aside) emerged as a new formation attempting to negotiate the space between transhumanism and posthumanism. *The Anarchist-Transhumanism Manifesto*⁹ declares that its proponents “especially draw upon Anarcho-Syndicalist, Anarcha-Feminist, and Libertarian Socialist branches of Anarchism. [They] do not consider *anarcho-capitalism* as a branch of anarchism in anyway shape or form. [*The Manifesto*] is antiauthoritarian and anti-capitalist.”¹⁰ Thus, despite fundamental differences, anarchist-transhumanism seems to intuitively align its anarchist values with those characterizing the posthuman approach. In this way, even though anarchist-transhumanism stems from Western humanism, the *Manifesto* provides an interesting critique of the original intellectual formation. Like posthumanism, anarchist-transhumanism seeks to abolish the hierarchical, dualist order, and like posthumanism – it values cooperation, freedom, and work for common good. The authors of the *Manifesto* stress that anarchism is not a utopian dream:

The words egalitarianism, equality, freedom, nondiscrimination, and cooperation are mentioned throughout this document and are hallmarks of what anarchism is fundamentally about. We acknowledge that science and technology cannot free us from all forms

8. Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism...*, 34.

9. An advanced debate on the subject is offered by Piotr Gorliński-Kucik in his article “On Liberatory Strategies of Digital Nomads” in this issue of *Er(r)go. Theory – Literature – Culture*, 87–110.

10. Kris Notaro et al., *An Anarchist-Transhumanism Manifesto*, 2016, https://static1.square-space.com/static/58ed4773d482e9c96b524401/t/5b55e00e88251b47553d169c/1532354591315/occulture_boris+Anarchist-TranshumanistManifesto.pdf (15.03.2021).

of oppression unless, as a society, we must be willing to cooperate in radical democratic and consensus voting methods to reach our goals.¹¹

Admittedly, in the anarchist-transhumanist perspective technological development must be consolidated with the development within the individuals and the community – but, like in the posthumanist approach, the traditional oppressive power dynamics must be abolished if the society is to progress.

In contrast to the approach adopted by the proponents of transhumanism, the antihumanists's point of departure is a radical critique of the human, and, consequently, of the modern rationality and technological progress. Antihumanism shares its postmodern roots with posthumanism, and, like posthumanism, it also dissociates itself from the universalist, dualist rhetoric typical of Western anthropocentric humanism. However, the essential difference between antihumanism and posthumanism is that the former embraces the end of the human, while the latter emphasizes the human's evolution.¹²

Although not entirely bias-free, Francesca Ferrando's inquiry into major posthumanist currents does employ a pluralist perspective. Her polyphonic approach serves to dismantle traditional divisions (such as those at the foundations of the Western, hegemonic, discourse of the human) and to pinpoint the fallacies at the core of the dualist, inherently anthropocentric assumptions of traditional humanism. In such a context it is clear that the deconstruction of the humanist notion of the human must inevitably involve the abandonment of the axiom of "human primacy" – but it is essential to observe that it also disqualifies all other types of dominance. Hence, the posthumanist movement itself is, inescapably, postcentric and postexclusive. Ferrando, who clearly advocates this position, insists that the posthuman should be mediated, inclusive and non-hierarchical at all times. In her perspective, the disassembling of the common view on the human is not necessarily tantamount to the radical rejection of the previous episteme, but rather to the development of an ongoing dialogue aiming at redefining the human by accessing the notion itself through alternative strategies. The long-established "human" as defined in contrast to non-human/less-human "others" has not only proven insufficient, but, most of all, exclusionary, and thereby harmful.

In this context, it is particularly important to observe that the contemporary, posthumanist revisitation of the concept of the human involves an inquiry into whether the word "human" ought to be approached as a *notion* (i.e. as a noun), or as a *process* (i.e. as a verb). Interestingly, albeit perhaps not surprisingly, in this context Ferrando alludes to Judith Butler's progressive take on gender, attempting

11. Notaro, *An Anarchist-Transhumanism Manifesto*, 17.

12. Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism...*, 45–53.

to approach the category of “human” in the manner in which Butler approached the category central to her study, that is, arguing that gender should be addressed as a verb, rather than as a noun. As is well known, according to Butler (echoing the work of Simone de Beauvoir), one is born with a sex “assigned” at birth, yet one’s gender is a cultural notion, conditioned by cultural norms. In her *Gender Trouble* (1990) Butler presents gender as a performative act, demonstrating that gender is not what we *have*, but what we *do*, thereby deconstructing the ritualized constitution of gender as it has been embedded in the Judeo-Christian cultural paradigms. Ferrando notes that the ways in which the categories of “gender” and “human” have been historically constituted continue to be keyed to the same hegemonic subjectivities. These subjectivities have had access to power, and thereby have been able to shape the processes of normativization affecting both: the social roles assigned to genders and the very definition of the human. Ferrando emphasizes that if we assume that “human,” like “gender,” is not an essence, but a process, it is possible to attain a viable posthumanist redefinition of the notion central to this debate, which, in turn, may lead to the rectification of the situation in which certain humans – like certain genders – are constantly denied recognition, not to mention access to power.¹³

Thus, Ferrando’s deconstructivist approach serves to discover the “always-already” of the human thought: an idea which may seem (surprisingly) new in the Western world of today, but which may have already been entertained before and may latently color the present reality, or one that currently functions as a component of common knowledge in a culture that has been dismissed as “other.” Dismissing such a dismissal, posthumanism aims to enhance communications between groups allowing no room for discriminatory sentiments of supremacy of one party over another. Stressing praxis, Ferrando endorses the importance of the idea of the posthuman by showcasing the fact that it is not only a theoretical stance – it is a new paradigm of practice.¹⁴

An interesting hybrid of some of the perspectives described above (of which Ferrando, surprisingly, does not write) is Xenofeminism – one of many intellectual currents under the posthumanist umbrella. As Piotr Gorliński-Kucik observes¹⁵, xenofeminism (or XF), is a radical feminist approach that proposes a profound critique of what is held to be “natural.” XF’s points of departure are technomaterialism, anti-naturalism, and gender abolitionism. It seeks to re-engineer the world by means of reason, yet it approaches reason quite differently than does the Western tradition. In xenofeminist view, reason is collective, independent of the “hierar-

13. Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism...*, 71–72.

14. Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism...*, 58–59.

15. Gorliński-Kucik, “On Liberatory Strategies of Digital Nomads,” 97–98.

chical” positions of particular individuals: “XF [...] names reason as an engine of feminist emancipation, and declares the right of everyone to speak as no one in particular.”¹⁶ Reclaiming “reason,” XF endorses the repurposing of technological innovations with the view to the maximization of their emancipatory potential. Xenofeminism sees technology’s importance in its potential to foster alternative models of reproduction and to resolve a wide variety of gender-related issues. Innovation, therefore, is to be considered in conjunction with theoretical and political concepts acknowledging the needs of those marginalized – women, queer, the gender non-conforming individuals – and as a part of the project that considers them an essential, relevant (and urgent!) issue. “There is nothing, we claim, that cannot be studied scientifically and manipulated technologically [...] If nature is unjust, change nature!” – reads the Laboria Cuboniks’s manifesto *Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation*¹⁷. Still, like other posthumanist currents, xenofeminism is not (yet) a consistent “school of thought.” Rather, it is a platform for intellectual opposition to imposed “universals.” The intersectional model for which XF strives must be built from the bottom up by individuals rejecting the marginalizing – sexist, racist, or ageist – monocentric universalisms. In essence, then, the core of XF is praxis.

The nature of the traditional anthropocentric approach and its inherent dualistic perspective turning “us” against “them” is problematic because it is not only a theoretical stance: more importantly, it translates to measures in practice. Ferrando mentions four recurring cases of exclusion from the status of the human: chattel slavery, genocide, freak shows, and witch trials. In all of those cases, the “others” – slaves, women, non-white people, disabled people, or those not fitting the “norm” in terms of appearance – were discursively dehumanized by the dominant groups. In order to overcome the ethical constraints concerning murder or abuse, and claiming the right to decide about the non-human life on the dualistic premise of human’s primacy over others (speciesism), the dominant groups would foster discourses justifying the elimination of the “others” from the sphere of influence or, even further, their extermination. In this context, the scholar quotes Gregory Stanton’s eight stages of genocide: classification, symbolization, dehumanization, organization, polarization, preparation, extermination, and denial, which

16. Laboria Cuboniks, *Xenofeminism – A Politics for Alienation*. Laboriacuboniks.Net <https://laboriacuboniks.net/manifesto/xenofeminism-a-politics-for-alienation> (07.05.2021).

17. Laboria Cuboniks, *Xenofeminism – A Politics for Alienation*. It seems important to observe that XF also advocates the deconstruction of the premises underlying the ethos of the nuclear family and opts towards reinventing the family structure, currently set to isolate women. This, of course, entails the deconstruction of the binaries underlying the economic cycles at the fundament of present-day capitalism.

exemplifies the truth that, so far, historically, “the human” has been performed through exclusion.¹⁸

As an epilogue, in “Concluding Celebration,” Ferrando affords her readers a comprehensive explanation of who the posthuman is and a concise set of guidelines on how to be posthuman. As philosophical posthumanism embodies an altogether new wave of critical thinking, a posthuman is required to execute a radical revision of what has thus far been cultivated as a norm. A posthuman is aware of biases and privileges, and thus is required to deconstruct them to access unlimited existential perception on the premise that “human” is not one, but many. A posthuman escapes speciesism, aware that the anthropocentric practices have had a devastating effect not only on non-human animals and the environment, but also on humans themselves – specifically, on the least privileged ones. A posthuman will dismiss hierarchies, demystifying polarizations and embracing diversity.¹⁹ Consequently, a posthuman recognizes the need of a shift in thinking about technology: from technocentrism towards the praxis of eco-technology.

Posthumanism, as has been shown, insists on action, for which reason the posthumanist approach may be applied to a plethora of areas of cultural practice. Many of the currently debated issues may be resolved by deconstructing common, habitual, ways of thinking. For instance, dismantling traditional gender roles and dismissing the custom of linking gender with sex assigned at birth could provide a substantial relief for non-cis people,²⁰ such as non-binary, transgender, intersex, two-spirit, gender fluid, agender, to name but a few forms of sexuality. The problematic aspect of the Western dichotomy, acknowledging only two genders, allows for acts of discrimination which go largely unnoticed – especially that the number of non-cis people is relatively small, which, in a hierarchically organized society, renders them irrelevant. However, in the horizontal – posthumanist – perspective, this is a serious issue: one that desperately needs addressing. As posthumanism aspires to embrace the wide variety of human experience, non-cis people stand a chance of gaining the acknowledgement of their *being* and thereby of living without fear, but also of being celebrated as valid and important participants of society, the recognition they have been denied in the traditional, anthropocentric, perspectives.

Another example of an issue (characteristic for societies whose systems of values are based on the largest monotheist religions) that could be resolved as a result of the Posthumanist revision of fundamentals of their cultures is that of sex work – and of the discrimination and dehumanization which

18. Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism*, 82–83.

19. Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism*, 185–190.

20. “Cis-gender” refers to a person who identifies themselves with the gender matching the sex assigned at birth.

it entails. A posthuman would acknowledge the existence of a massive market of sex services (both actual and virtual) and question the essence of the rule by which sex workers, providing physical labor, are to be ostracized, while those performing physical work in a warehouse should be commended. Likewise, why should the gravity of the mental effort that sex work entails be diminished while the stress that academic or office work involves is recognized as a serious problem? From the posthumanist point of view, the marginalization – and demonization – of the omnipresent sex work, based on customary Christian values, is untenable. The abandonment of such a perspective in the posthuman reality would result in the non-discrimination of sex workers and in the vouchsafing of the protection of their rights. These two cases exemplify many of the problems created by, and unresolvable within, the traditional humanist paradigm: issues, which the Posthumanist praxis would be able to eliminate.

To recapitulate, I wish to stress that Francesca Ferrando's *Philosophical Posthumanism* constitutes an important attempt to propose an inclusive philosophical approach that allows one to acknowledge all subjectivities – both organic and non-organic. Posthumanism, as presented by the scholar, provides practical solutions that can be implemented in order to resolve the currently irresolvable social and ethical issues that cannot be sufficiently addressed within the present-day, anthropocentric, conceptual system. The recognition of the long-term futility of the unreflectively adopted – inherited or imposed – discriminatory paradigms, energizing one's tendency to deconstructs the binarities upon which the traditional humanist *weltanschauungs* have been built, might open the passageway to an altogether new level of empathic awareness and be the fundament of a sustainable, posthumanist, ethics.

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